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# Catherine de' Medici: The Crafting of an Evil Legend

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CATHERINE DE' MEDICI:  
THE CRAFTING OF AN EVIL LEGEND

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Western Civilization  
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When describing the legend of the evil Italian queen, Catherine de' Medici, and why Medici has been historically misrepresented, being credited with such malediction and wickedness, N.M Sutherland states that she has been viewed as a, "...monster of selfish ambition, who sacrificed her children, her adopted country, her principles - if she ever had any - , and all who stood in her way to the satisfaction of her all-consuming desire for power."<sup>1</sup> The legend of the wicked Italian queen held widespread attraction among many, especially after Medici's death in 1589. The famous legend paints Medici inaccurately by disregarding her achievements as queen regent as well as her constant struggle to administer peace during a time of intense political turmoil and religious feuding, and it assumes that Medici was a victim of circumstance. The evil reputation of Catherine de' Medici, the "wicked" queen of France was not warranted, being built upon legend and myth rather than fact. Medici's portrayal as "evil" arose from the stigma attached to women as political leaders; the acts Medici committed were the result of her desire to efficiently govern the chaotic French monarchy and not merely the result of her cruel leadership.

Catherine de' Medici, daughter of the Duke of Urbino, Lorenzo de' Medici, and Countess of Boulogne, Madeline de La Tour d' Auvergne, was born in 1519 into the difficult political climate of early 16th Century Europe. Following the end of the Crusades, European politics had become increasingly dominated by religious conflicts, and the Protestant Reformation was beginning, ignited by Martin Luther's criticism of the Roman Catholic Church. Although Catherine de' Medici was born to a powerful Italian prince from the Medici family, she had a

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<sup>1</sup>N. M. Sutherland. "Catherine De Medici: The Legend of the Wicked Italian Queen." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* Vol. 9, no. 2 (July 1978): 45. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539662>.

difficult upbringing. She was orphaned almost immediately after birth, as her mother fell ill and died a few days subsequent to her birth, and her father died a week later. She was then taken in and cared for by members of the Medici family, her paternal grandmother Alfonsina Orsini, and her uncle Giulio de Medici, who was elected Pope Clement VII in 1523 after inheriting the rule of Florence. Medici was then sent after infancy to be educated and trained by nuns in Florence and Rome, until she was summoned by Pope Clement VII to be married in Rome in 1530. Pope Clement VII offered the King of France an arranged marriage that would produce, “an alliance between the papacy and the French crown against the Holy Roman Empire.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, in 1533, Medici was married off to Henry II, who later in 1547 inherited the crown from his father.

Beginning her position as the queen of France, Catherine de’ Medici found herself disliked and shunned among the court of her father-in-law, Francis I. Despite being ostracized in her new home due to her heritage, Medici made the best of her circumstances by developing many ambitions for politics and government, as well as a passion for building and leadership.<sup>3</sup> Medici’s marriage to Henry II however, was not a happy one. The couple was unable to bear children for ten years, and Henry demonstrated little interest in Medici, instead focusing his attention on his mistress, Diane de’ Poitiers, who remained his mistress until his unexpected death in July of 1559. Poitiers held the favor of Henry and the power to influence and guide his decisions, leading up to his death, while Medici struggled to gain status and power for herself. However, the union between Henry II and Catherine de’ Medici was not unsuccessful. In 1544,

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<sup>2</sup>Katherine Crawford. “Catherine de Medicis and the Performance of Political Motherhood,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* Vol. 31, no. 3 (Autumn, 2000): 643. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2671075>.

<sup>3</sup>Crawford, “Catherine de Medicis Political Motherhood,” 643.

after years of infertility, Medici bore her husband his first child, Francis II, and they went on to have eleven more children, of which six survived infancy. Up until her husband's death, Medici was predominantly excluded from politics, and was largely constricted in her utilization of political authority, as she operated under the leadership of her husband, since, "she lacked the king's body and his hereditary position, however, she could not simply adopt traditional male icons of power to figure her own authority."<sup>4</sup> Her claim and ascendance into political prominence followed his death, in which the French monarchy was immediately thrust into crisis.

While tensions within France were strong as intense civil disputes between Catholics and Huguenots disrupted the monarchy, Catherine de Medici was able to achieve greater political power and status for herself. Her sons, Francis II (1559-1560), Charles IX (1560-1574), and Henry III (1574-89) reigned in an age of almost constant civil and religious war in France, where Medici had to step in and rule in their place to keep the monarchy from collapsing. She became Queen regent of France in 1560, and was appointed to administer France on behalf of her ten year old son Charles IX. In this new position of supremacy, Medici operated largely on her own initiative and without the support of a male in power. She "asserted a new definition of the queen mother in politics, one that was born out of and fraught with tension, but one that proved remarkably durable."<sup>5</sup> However, this was a time of turmoil and frustration for Medici as she struggled to administer peace within her policy. In 1561, she began trying to regain the favor of both religious factions by, "bringing Catholic and Protestant theologians together at the Colloquy of Poissy and by promoting religious toleration through legislation instead of continuing the

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<sup>4</sup>Sheila Ffolliott. "Casting a Rival into the Shade: Catherine de' Medici and Diane de Poitiers." *Art Journal* 48 no. 2 (Summer, 1989): 138-143. <https://doi.org/10.2307/776963>.

<sup>5</sup>Crawford, "Catherine de' Medicis Political Motherhood," 644.

harsh persecution of Protestants initiated by Francis I and continued by his son Henry II.”<sup>6</sup>

Although reconciliation failed, Medici demonstrated persistent determination in her attempts to prevent the incessant religious feuding. She did so by continuing to make further efforts in reconciliation with the Huguenots, as she signed the Edict of Amboise in 1563, which allowed the legalization of Huguenot worship, thus ending the first civil war of the French Wars of Religion. With the second two civil wars that followed, Medici had little political influence to prevent them, as Catholic extremists acted out in defiance and violence towards the Edict of Amboise. Consequently, Medici attempted to re-establish her position (which seemed threatened by the murder of Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, the leader of the Huguenots) by gaining the support of Elizabeth I of England. This attempt was futile, as the instability of the government in France was too great. The religious feuding in France had finally reached its pinnacle with the Massacre of St. Bartholomew’s Day, for which Catherine de’ Medici has traditionally been credited and responsible.

The Massacre of St. Bartholomew’s day was a targeted group of assassinations and a wave of Catholic mob violence, directed against Huguenots. The mass murder occurred only a few days after the wedding of Medici’s daughter, Margaret of Valois, to the Protestant Henry III of Navarre, the future Henry IV of France. Two days after the attempted assassination of G. Coligny, king Charles IX ordered the killing of a group of Huguenot leaders, including Coligny, and the mass murder spread throughout Paris. The news of these killings had prompted Catholics in other cities and towns to participate in the mass murder of the Huguenots. King Charles IX

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<sup>6</sup>R. J. Knecht. "Catherine De' Medici and the French Wars of Religion." *Historian* no. 62 (Summer, 1999): 18.  
[https://search.library.pdx.edu/permalink/f/eqsjiv/TN\\_proquest275008724](https://search.library.pdx.edu/permalink/f/eqsjiv/TN_proquest275008724).

ordered for the violence to be stopped, but the massacre had spiraled out of control, and lasted for another week. Roughly 3,000 French Protestants were killed in Paris, and as many as 70,000 were killed in all of France. The Massacre of St. Bartholomew's day significantly shaped the course of French history as it initiated a new chapter in the Wars of Religion, but also significantly shaped the image of Catherine de' Medici.

Catherine de Medici's involvement in the Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day, August 23 and 24, 1572, entirely shaped her future image, and is one of the primary reasons Medici is assigned a wicked narrative. Four years succeeding the massacre, in an anonymous document printed by Henri Estienne (French printer and classical scholar), Catherine de' Medici and her policy were brutally misjudged. The author portrays Medici as the epitome of female evil, and harshly criticizes and blames her for the massacre in his manuscript titled, *Discours merveilleux de la vie, actions, et déportements de Catherine de Médicis*. The manuscript, released in 1575, triggered an onslaught of accusations against Medici, from which her wicked reputation was fabricated. It became a "'best-seller' whose purpose was to blacken the queen mother's reputation and to prevent her from consolidating her power after Charles IX's death."<sup>7</sup> The anonymous author writes in his manuscript, that Medici should be sentenced for the extermination of Protestants, "Who in one day hath cause to murder more men, women and children, then did Brunehaut in all his wars."<sup>8</sup> Catherine de' Medici has been traditionally

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<sup>7</sup>Larissa Juliet Taylor, review of *Discours Merveilleux de la vie, actions et deportements de Catherine de Medicis*, Royne-Mere." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* Vol. 27, no.4 (Winter, 1996): 1135-1137. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2543944>.

<sup>8</sup>*Discours merveilleux de la vie, actions, et déportements de Catherine de Médicis*, Royne-Mère. Manuscripts, 1576. Early English Books Online, 2019. <https://search-proquest-com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/docview/2240894851?accountid=13265>.

blamed for this event, however, she had less involvement in the massacre than she is credited. On August 26, 1572, two days after the massacre, the king assumed the responsibility by a declaration in the Parliament of Paris. However, even after this declaration, many assumed Medici had orchestrated the decision solely to benefit her own agenda, and like the author of *Discours merveilleux de la vie, actions, et déportements de Catherine de Médicis*, were eager to blame her for it. Medici's agenda and the intentions behind her actions were controversial among the people, as many overlooked the fact that the massacre occurred because the court had no other choice. France was faced with hostility, mass murders, and sectarian violence up until this point, and with the failed assassination of G. Coligny, the political state of France was in shambles. The massacre of these Huguenot leaders was an attempt at ending the religious war, and an attempt towards peace. Medici had, "attracted both hostility and admiration from Catholics and Protestants alike since bigots, extremists, and self-seekers, as well as moderates, existed on both sides."<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Medici has been blamed for the catalyst of the massacre, the assassination of G. Coligny. The French court, among them Medici, authorized this decision. She should not have to bear the chief responsibility of this decision however, as she was not the only one that made it. Medici's policy was "constructive and the best that was possible in the circumstances."<sup>10</sup> The decisions that she and other members of the court made were not ruthless, but pragmatic and necessary considering the political state of France and the intense Protestant retaliation that was brewing. Members of the court were absorbed with overwhelming fear that the Protestants within the city would attack due to the attempted murder of G. Coligny, and many

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<sup>9</sup>Sutherland, "The Legend of the Wicked Queen," 46.

<sup>10</sup>Sutherland, "The Legend of the Wicked Queen," 48.



were already taking actions of violence. Medici and others of the court were forced to take actions in preserving the French crown, and in maintaining royal authority.

The Massacre of St. Bartholomew's day mesmerized historians and authors in sixteenth century France, and many felt compelled not to understand the incident, but to place the blame for it directly on Catherine de' Medici. The argument that Medici was a wicked, evil, and cruel woman who sacrificed her children and country for her own personal gain, was an argument influenced by those who had come to this conclusion based upon legend and "emotional force," rather than validity.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, "in some works Catherine became not only the wicked author of the massacre but also the symbol of all that was held to be degraded in the *mores* of the times."<sup>12</sup> The accounts of the legend of Medici's wickedness written during her lifetime and beyond, have been influenced by accusations of poisoning and incest, which have played into the tradition of female defamation dating back to classical times.

In early 16th century Europe, women struggled to navigate the patriarchal system that generally denied their feelings and opinions. The social structure during this time limited women in their involvement in politics, and encouraged women to be subservient. Female leaders such as Catherine de' Medici had a difficult time gaining authority because the, "French monarchy was quite stingy about allowing women positions of political power."<sup>13</sup> When women assumed positions of power, they were often more harshly scrutinized and judged more strictly than were

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<sup>11</sup>Sutherland, "The Legend of the Wicked Queen," 46.

<sup>12</sup>Sutherland, "The Legend of the Wicked Queen," 46.

<sup>13</sup>Crawford, "Catherine de' Medicis Political Motherhood," 644.

their male counterparts. When Medici became Queen regent of France, many were not pleased. The author of *Discours merveilleux de la vie, actions, et déportements de Catherine de Médicis, Royne-Mère*, describes Medici's policy and the way that she governed, stating that, "Howbeit finally with my self considering that she yet lieth, and not only lieth, but ruleth all things according unto those passions in which to governe herself."<sup>14</sup> The author illustrates that Catherine de' Medici was involved in villainous and filthy behaviors, and that she is only concerned with her own regime. Medici held almost no political influence and her powers were strictly nominal during the reign of her husband, however after his death, Medici was thrust into the political arena. Her ambition to govern herself and the French monarchy was seen as a threat to many within the court and society, and as one can clearly see, the author of the 1575 manuscript agrees. The author continues by describing the contempt and dissatisfaction with Medici's claim to power specifically among the men, stating that, "Yea the Quene, who knew well enough that most part of the mighty men of this kingdome did detest and abhor hir so for horrible mischiefs. . ."<sup>15</sup> The author portrays Medici as weak and mischievous, and implies that the men in the kingdom could be doing a better job, because they are stronger and more powerful. However, Nancy Goldstone, author of an article detailing Medici's reign written in 2015, titled, "The Rival Queens: Catherine de' Medici, Her Daughter Marguerite de Valois, and the Betrayal That ignited a Kingdom," asserts that, ". . .the French queen mother was less Machiavellian in nature than generally believed. . ."<sup>16</sup> Many within Medici's court felt threatened by a woman's ambition and

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<sup>14</sup>*Discours merveilleux déportements Catherine de Médicis*, 3.

<sup>15</sup>*Discours merveilleux déportements Catherine de Médicis*, 47.

<sup>16</sup>Nancy, Goldstone. "The Rival Queens," *Publishers Weekly* Vol. 262, no. 18 (May, 2015): 110.

eagerness to carve out a political role for herself, and Medici's time in political power was looked down upon because females were meant to perform very specific duties. Gender roles in society during the 16th century affected the way Medici was perceived, and her policy as a whole was scrutinized due to this. The anonymous author of the 1575 manuscript goes on to attack women rulers and compares Medici to other infamous female leaders who brought destruction to France, such as Fredegund, Brunhilde, and Blanche of Castille. He states, "For the nature of this woman is always to be doing evil: and this much more I say, that never woman who yet goverened our Realme, did bried more mischief. I will not here repeat the monstrous vices both of her self and of others. Fredegund, Brunehaut, and Ludith. . . [set] jealousy between the Father and the son, the brother and the brother. . ." <sup>17</sup> The author accuses these female leaders of causing the men in the kingdom to act out of jealousy and turn against each other. He denounces the actions Medici took, in trying to keep peace within the French Monarchy during the French Wars of Religion, and describes her as "monstrous," and assesses her character based upon the problems and the background of the times. One author by the name of Jo Eldridge Carney, additionally comments on the kingdom's view of female leaders, affirming that, ". . . subjects were often threatened by the anomaly of a woman on the throne; or with the widespread cultural unease about female unruliness that marked the sixteenth century." <sup>18</sup> Not only was

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<https://link-gale-com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/apps/doc/A413169243/AONE?u=s1185784&sid=AONE&xid=054b0369>.

<sup>17</sup>*Discours merveilleux déportements Catherine de Médicis*, 67.

<sup>18</sup>Carney, Jo Eldridge. "'I'll Find a Day to Massacre them all': Tamora in Titus Andronicus and Catherine De Médicis." *Comparative Drama* Vol. 48, no. 4 (Winter, 2014): 415-435,466.

Medici judged more strictly for her gender, but she was also further condemned due to her heritage and background. The author continues in his manuscript to blame Medici for her sins; the sins of her culture:

First Katherine [Catherine] de Medicis is a Florentine wherein is to be considered, that is among all nationes, in craft and subtiltie Italy beareth the Name, so in Italy Tuscan, and in Tuscan Florence excelleth, as all common proverbes and wryters do testifie: And at what tyme foeuer this detestable craft of deciet or fraud taketh, rute in any person destitue of consience (Whereof this Nation for the most part, is not greatly stoared) I will leave unto you to think what nomber and diversitie of mischeifs of that partie we may attend. Well to proceed, she is of the famley of the Medicis.<sup>19</sup>

The author states that Florentines are known for their guile and subtlety, and that Italians in general are known for being fraudulent, deceitful, and mischievous. He then states that specifically Medici harbors these traits. During the sixteenth century, large numbers of Italian immigrants occupied France, and many were treated as manipulators, poisoners, and thought to be sexually deviant because of their culture. Medici's origins, "would also work against her with rampant xenophobia targeting the large numbers of Italians who had found a new home in France after the turbulence of the Italian wars. . ."<sup>20</sup> Catherine de Medici's, "sexual deviance," due to her gender and culture, would furthermore work against her as stereotypes emerged that described her "sexual exploitation" of her ladies-in-waiting, known as the "Flying Squadron."

Medici's court of sexual women was largely made believable because of the image of women as sexual manipulators and as sexually voracious. It was believed that Medici ordered these women to seduce influential noblemen, and that some of these women were eventually

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<sup>19</sup>*Discours merueilleux deportements Catherine de Medicis*, 3.

<sup>20</sup>Una, McIlvenna. *Scandal and Reputation at the Court of Catherine de Medici*. London: Routledge, 2016: 11. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315607672>.

involved in scandals around poisoning, adultery, and incest. For example, poisoning was traditionally viewed as a “female” crime because of a woman's lack of physical strength, and because of her responsibilities for preparing food and drink. Many of the rumors began because, “power and authority was threatened – at least, in the eyes of the parliamentaries – by the political prominence of Catherine de Medici and the increasingly public role of the women of her household.”<sup>21</sup> These rumors were based solely off of stereotypes attributed to women, and were made believable as rumors got around, which played a vital role in shaping the image of these women, and most importantly, Medici.

The wicked legend of Catherine de’ Medici is an intriguing story, one that has morphed over centuries, and become increasingly enhanced and fabricated in order to provide entertainment and fascination upon hearing it. The famous legend and its origins are significant because it shows how gender roles were historically perceived in society and how these roles are perceived by society today. Medici’s narrative brings awareness to how men and women were treated differently within positions of power, and how the social structures of the times influence one's image more than the actual facts that mold their policy. It is vital to examine the narratives of female leaders whose stories have been twisted, and whose impacts on the world during their times have been ignored. Catherine de’ Medici was a passionate ruler interested in politics and government, a fiercely protective mother, and strong leader of the French monarchy during a time of intense political turmoil. It is important as a society to become more aware of a person's own implicit biases that affect the conclusions they make. Much of what is known about history has been written long ago, in a time containing different values and beliefs. As author Edith

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<sup>21</sup>McIlvenna, “Court Life and Its Critics: *Scandal at the Court of Medici*,” 2.

Helen Sichel states in her novel, *Catherine de' Medici and the French Reformation*, "History is not written in black and white, but in subtle grays and half tints, and studying some character from the past is often like looking at a figure in a faded fresco on which we cannot get a full light. At first we see its robes as black."<sup>22</sup> It would be intriguing and enriching for scholars to take the conclusions that historians came to in the past, and re-examine their conclusions through a lens of what implicit biases existed at the time, and how they have affected the perception of historical figures. It would be thought-provoking for scholars to further investigate Catherine de' Medici's letters she wrote during her lifetime, and to compare them to how she was perceived in documents written by 16th century authors. One might also consider tracing the changes in her perception and reputation through documents beginning in the 16th century, all the way up to the 21st century. Catherine de Medici was a powerful and influential female leader that has been historically misrepresented throughout history. By further researching why she has been represented with such malediction, one will be able to discern that she has been perceived this way due to the stigma attached to female leaders, and that she deserves to be recognized for her achievements as Queen regent of the French monarchy.

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<sup>22</sup>Edith Helen Sichel, *Catherine de' Medici French Reformation*, 5.

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